

On February 25, 1870, Hiram R. Revels of Mississippi became the first African American to serve in the U.S. Senate, rising above adversity. As we pause to pay homage to prolific Americans during Black History Month, I would be remiss not to recognize Senator Hiram R. Revels for his trailblazing leadership, resilience, and selfless devotion to public service and our nation.

Hiram R. Revels was born in 1822 in Fayetteville County, North Carolina. At the time, African Americans in the state were forbidden to learn to read and write. Determined to defy the societal customs of the era, Revels moved to Ohio where he began studying ministry at a black seminary and became an ordained minister in 1845. He continued his studies at Beech Grove Seminary, a Quaker school. It was during this time that he became involved with the teachings of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, a significant religious and educational force in the African American communities. As an educator and minister in the AME Church, Revels preached in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas, and Maryland in the 1850s. Revels later graduated from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois in 1857.

During the Civil War, Revels helped form regiments of African American soldiers and established schools for freed slaves. After the war, Revels moved to Natchez, Mississippi, where he was elected as alderman and eventually state senator. As a result of his diligence and stellar leadership, he was elected as the first African American member of the U.S. Senate, representing one of Mississippi's vacant seats as the state prepared to rejoin the Union. A few senators objected, distortedly arguing that Revels had not been a U.S. citizen for the nine years, a requirement for serving in the Senate--African Americans had only technically become citizens four years earlier, after the passage of the 1866 Civil Rights Act. However, this anamorphic ploy to keep him out of the Senate failed--the Senate voted 48 to 8 in favor of Revels, leading to him becoming the first African American to serve in the U.S. Senate.

It is on the shoulders of giants like Senator Hiram R. Revels that all members of Congress and the nation are forever indebted to.